



Modern teaching materials: SWOT analysis of an ESP textbook

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed renewed interest in the role of language teaching materials in facilitating the teaching and learning of English, partly due to an unprecedented integration of ICT in language education. There may be some scepticism regarding the potentials of new technologies but it is hard to deny that ICT-driven language teaching is more attractive and allows a high degree of individualisation in the learning process - one of the pillars of modern ELT methodology. Using multimedia tools aims at developing cognitive learning skills and promotes autonomous learning. However, despite a wide array of the types of materials available, including both those specifically designed for language teaching and authentic materials that can be selected and exploited for teaching purposes, a traditional textbook is still perceived as an indispensable attribute of the teaching/learning process. Attractive modern textbooks are expected to reflect the current trends in ELT methodology, in particular the learner-centered approach. The market of English language teaching materials offers textbooks and coursebook packages covering many different aspects of language learning and language use. To match individual needs of the learner they range from comprehensive general courses to specialised series which concentrate on one aspect of English or one specific skill. But what is the future of a textbook? Will it be replaced by interactive multimedia? The article looks at the role and position of a textbook in the world of modern teaching materials.

1. Introduction

Tomlinson [1] defines 'materials' as "anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language. They can be linguistic, visual, auditory or kinaesthetic, and they can be presented in print, through live performance or display, or on a cassette, CD-ROM, DVD or the internet". In recent years the field of language teaching is dominated by discussions on interactive multimedia. Traditional textbooks seem to be of lesser importance when contrasted with ICT potentials. A variety of media formats including video, sound or animations provide opportunities for multidimensional and multisensory language learning. Yet, despite common enthusiasm for numerous modern tools the popularity of textbooks does not decline. A textbook is still the most important teaching aid 'not only survives, it thrives'[2]. The authors notice that 'textbooks clearly survive because they satisfy certain needs'.

The number of new titles is growing, particularly in more specialized areas of ESP. Every ESP course, aiming at satisfying learners' real-world professional demands as effectively as possible, must be based on specific situations which the learner will be involved in. The starting point of every ESP course design is a detailed needs analysis which allows to define competence gaps in relevant areas, set the required level of knowledge and specify the ways of achieving it. Therefore courses of languages for specific purposes may vary in choice of language skills, functions and topics taught. One of the main assumptions of English for Specific Purposes is that teaching materials should enable learners to acquire the variety of language and skills they will need in typical situations they meet in their professional life.

Effective use of language is difficult to learn. It is a complex goal covering many elements: good language knowledge, use of specific job-related vocabulary, social skills, good communication skills, use of proper structures, style and tone. There are opinions that textbooks are inadequate to meet such diversified needs of the learners. McGrath [3] argues that 'books are written to be relevant to as large a number of students as possible, which also means as wide a range of teaching-learning



contexts as possible. It follows that no one book can be perfect for a particular institution, let alone a particular class within that institution or an individual within a class'. On the other hand, as Saraceni [4] notices 'in a few other cases, the materials tend to focus on such specific needs, styles and interests that they become restricted and can only be effective and useful for a limited group of learners without much flexibility and choice. Nevertheless, textbooks remain 'the mainstay of EFL provision'.

2. Popularity of learning materials - empirical research

The popularity of a textbook was confirmed by the results of a research on ESP learning materials undertaken in 2009. The survey was carried out at one of the leading universities in Poland. 250 undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students of business related subjects were chosen to express their opinions on usefulness of various learning / teaching materials. All respondents were adults with at least B2 level fluency in English. The results of the research allow to draw some very interesting conclusions but due to article length limitations only the most relevant, regarding the role and position of a textbook as a didactic tool, will be discussed.

When asked about types of materials used to learn English the respondents name, first of all, textbooks specially written for language teaching/learning purposes. Other materials include:

English academic and professional textbooks covering business related subjects;

The Internet;

Television programmes;

Newspapers and magazines.

The analysis of the results shows that 55% of all respondents regard language textbooks as very useful in learning EFL and 41% find them useful. For a similar number of those surveyed, English academic subject and professional textbooks are very useful or useful. Another very frequently chosen source of information is the Internet. 93% of the respondents regard it as very useful or useful and only 6% as less than useful. No one considers it as useless. The other two options are chosen by a considerably lower number of learners. Asked about the Press 16 % of the respondents find reading newspapers and magazines as less than useful for developing their language skills while 2% say they are useless. TV is useless as a language learning tool for 5% of the respondents and for 18% is less than useful.

Table 1. Usefulness of various types of didactic materials in (%*).

Materials	Very useful	Useful	Less than useful	Useless
Language textbooks	55	41	2	2
English academic and professional textbooks	48	47	5	0
Internet	45	48	6	1
TV	26	50	18	5
Press	26	57	16	2

Respondents could choose more than one option.

The research shows that the leading role of textbooks is unquestionable. Whether written for language or subject learning/teaching purposes this didactic material is most often chosen by learners. The only real alternative for a textbook seems to be the Internet. Neither newspapers and magazines nor television programmes can replace textbooks as providers of information and support in language learning process. It is interesting then to find an answer to the question posed by Hutchinson and Torres [5]: 'Why, we might reasonably ask, given the extent of the influence of textbooks, does there appear to be at best apathy and at worst hostility to them in academic circles'.



3. SWOT analysis of ESP textbooks

Because of its role in the didactic process and popularity, textbooks should be thoroughly analysed and evaluated as ESP teaching material. Due to the length constraints of this article only selected issues will be addressed.

3.1 Strengths

Hedge and Whitney [6] define a textbook as 'an organized and pre-packed set of teaching- learning material'. It is the basis for the language input and practice learners receive. There are a lot of advantages that can be listed. Some of them are:

Textbooks can develop communicative competence;

In today's working environment language skills, communication skills and business-related skills have become to be perceived as the requisites that are equally important to university education and qualifications. Yet, linguistic competence needs to be combined with sociolinguistic competence and with pragmatic competence. Coursebooks now focus on task solving, analyzing facts and figures, interpreting data, solving dilemmas and taking decisions, analyzing case studies in various real-life situations. Business English courses have become more diversified, less heterogeneous and more complex.

Textbooks can be flexible;

Some coursebooks are designed in the way that they can be customized for different learners, depending on the level of the students, and different teaching objectives.

Textbooks provide a structure for the management of the lesson as a social interaction and a basis for negotiation between all the relevant parties [7].

3.2. Weaknesses

Textbooks contents are not based on learners' needs analysis;

Textbooks provide inadequate material;

Textbooks contain conventional, quasi-authentic language.

Textbooks tasks are oversimplified and not challenging for learners, particularly adult learners;

3.3. Opportunities

Uniformity of the course content.

When using various teaching materials learners have to look for information, evaluate its suitability and select the most relevant. With too much information available in various sources, it may be a challenging and time consuming task that not every learner wants to undertake. Besides, both learners and teachers may use different sources and as a result find different information. This may pose a problem when testing the knowledge. Textbooks define what needs to be taught and learnt and what will be tested at the end of the course. Additionally, differences in learning styles can not be ignored. Computer Assisted Language Learning, for example, is less predictable, in this respect, than a textbook.

Necessary guidelines for learners/teachers

When using materials that do not provide any background information or guidelines on what and how to teach, the teacher has to prepare everything herself/himself - from deciding what to teach through finding the appropriate material to choosing the right strategy. Teachers working with a textbook find direction to lessons, ideas for discussions, explanations of more difficult terms or expressions. Most of textbooks designed for teaching English for Business include additional discipline related information, particularly appreciated by inexperienced business teachers who may not have enough non-linguistic knowledge.

3.4. Threats

Attractive modern textbooks are expected to match the individual needs of the learner and at the same time reflect the current trends in ESP methodology. The English language teaching materials market



offers textbooks and coursebook packages covering many different aspects of language learning and use. They range from comprehensive general courses to specialised series which concentrate on one aspect of English or one specific skill. Yet, as Dudley-Evans and StJohn [8] argue 'a single set of didactic material is seldom sufficient to meet the exact learning needs of any ESP learner'. Other sources of information may be necessary to complement the contents of a textbook. The biggest threat seems to be Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL).

One of the conclusions drawn from the research was that the Internet enjoys popularity similar to textbooks. 'The most important result that learning materials can achieve is to engage the emotions of learners. Laughter, joy, excitement, sorrow and anger can promote learning. Neutrality, numbness and nullity cannot' [9]. As Berman [10] notices 'we learn best when we see things as part of a recognised pattern, when our imaginations are aroused, when we make natural associations between one idea and another and when the information appeals to our senses'. Unfortunately textbooks, even though printed in colour, on good quality paper, with attractive graphic design do not have such potentials. ICT introduction to language teaching-learning process creates opportunities for affective engagement and experiential learning. The Internet may become the main 'tool of the trade' [11] in the future; especially when presently born babies will become learners.

4. Conclusion

Despite a wide range of alternative materials, the textbook still tends to be the main teaching-learning aid. Yet, more and more teachers agree with Cunningsworth [12] that 'there is no perfect textbook which meets all the requirements of teachers and students. Instead, it is the responsibility of the teacher to explore his own way of using or adapting the coursebook.' The ability to adapt and supplement commercial materials may be vital for the success of the teaching process, particularly in cases when the needs of the learners are very precisely defined. As Tomlinson [13] concludes current trends in approaches to language teaching put new demands on the teacher who is 'expected to be capable of generating a supportive psychological climate and sustain learner motivation and interest in class'. Above all, 'teaching is a partnership between teacher and materials. [23].

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